

R A K E - O F F

B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

THE I HAD BURNED OUT on the sign, making it read CASINO, like a whimpered protest against something too late to stop.

Carstairs reached into his coat pocket and checked the envelope again. Inside was a cashier's check for twenty thousand dollars. It represented everything he owned in the world. He straightened the jacket, which seemed to hang loosely on his shoulders. All the diets over all the years hadn't lost him as much weight as the last two days of fear.

Last night had been the worst. His wife had phoned the hotel from Iowa City, in tears. "You've got to pay them the money. You've got to." A man named Wallace had called her at work, scared her so badly she'd had to leave early. Told her that Carstairs owed twenty thousand dollars to a casino owner named Stahl. "They know everything! They knew my name, where Cindy goes to school. You've got to pay him!"

He'd spent the morning on the phone, raising the money. A second mortgage. Cashing his pension. A loan from the credit union. The savings account. All to make one thin piece of paper in an envelope in the breast pocket of his suit.

The worst had been the explanations. Yes, he'd gambled it all away. His first trip to Reno and he'd run himself twenty thousand dollars in the hole in three days. Telling the story over and over again, to the bank, to his boss, all hope of dignity gone.

Stahl's Hotel and Casino was only five blocks from the MGM Grand and all the glitter of downtown Reno. It looked like it was twenty years in the past. The lobby windows were coated with grime and the water-stained stucco was riddled with hairline cracks. The carpet inside the glass doors was worn through to the mat. It was the sort of place Carstairs had believed you could make a killing in. You never got rich at Caesar's. The tasteless, conditioned air, the rich carpeting, everything was too controlled, too predictable. Stahl's was the sort of place where the impossible could still happen.

It still seemed like it had been somebody else who had kept betting after the money was gone. Someone else had stood there like a wax dummy while the croupier signaled the pit boss to come and take him off the floor. He was not a fool. He'd run his own heating and air conditioning service for thirty years. He'd always had an eye for his best interests. Until he discovered roulette.

He had to pass the tables on his way to Stahl's office to deliver the check. He stopped for a moment and listened to the pattering of the wheel and the soft clicking of chips. The irony was overpowering. Here he stood with twenty thousand dollars in his pocket, and he'd already lost it. Right in front of him there was money for the taking—or the winning—enough to pay back his debt to Stahl, to buy back the mortgage and the pension and the loan, to put everything right again. But not for him. The check was in his name, but it

belonged to Stahl. It was as good as handed over, and the clatter of chips was for somebody else.

A thin glistening of sweat came out on Carstairs' forehead.

He had an idea. A jest. He'd lost the twenty thousand in chips, he would pay it back in chips. He imagined the look on Stahl's face as he dumped a huge double handful of chips across the desk, saying, "Go ahead, count it. It's all there." Why not? It wasn't every day he lost everything.

He got in line at the cashier's window and wiped his suddenly damp palms on his pants leg. A moment later he was re-crossing the gaming floor, holding two stacks of oblong thousand-dollar markers. He passed the roulette table again and stopped to watch. Just for a moment.

THREE HOURS LATER it was gone. He had two thousand left of the twenty, the rest gambled away on the most improbable run of black numbers he had ever seen.

He felt oddly free. Nothing worse could happen to him. This was the bottom, the end. Nothing left to lose. With two thousand dollars he might be able to get to Mexico and hide out there. For a while. The idea was appalling, and yet somehow possible.

A voice said, "Put it on seventeen. All of it."

Carstairs snapped back to the real world. He was surrounded by sweating, perfumed strangers, by the odors of whiskey and cigarettes. The press of bodies seemed unnaturally hot. He looked for the voice and found himself staring into the eyes of a small, dark man in evening clothes. The stranger looked away again, but this time Carstairs saw his lips move. "Seventeen. Number seventeen. Hurry."

Why not? he thought. Only fools and crazy people put everything on a single number. But then he was crazy to think two thousand dollars was enough to save him. A fool to have ever set foot in this place. He didn't care anymore. He was a puppet, and fate, or something like it, had just pulled his string.

He took the chips and used them to cover number 17.

"No more bets, please, no more," the croupier said.

Carstairs eased back from the edge of the table and started to turn away. His feet carried him, but he didn't know where to. It didn't seem to matter.

The croupier said, "Number seventeen. Red." Carstairs froze, convinced he had misheard. He turned, slowly, to see the dark man in the tuxedo holding out a handful of chips. "Your winnings, sir." They were ten thousand dollar chips. There were seven of them.

Seventy thousand dollars.

He got change, still in a trance, and handed the croupier a thousand. He turned to look for the man in the tux but he was gone. He walked to the cashier's window.

I know this is a dream, Carstairs thought. So let me wake up now, while I still have this feeling, this feeling of the chips in my hand.

"Cash or check, sir?" asked the cashier.

“Hmmm? Oh, check. Er, make it checks.” He told her how he wanted them, waiting for her to change her mind, to tell him the catch. She made out the checks and ran them through the imprinter and handed them to him.

Three carpeted stairs led up out of the gaming area. The pit boss waited for Carstairs at the top. “Mr. Wallace would like to see you upstairs.”

“Yes.”

“What?”

Carstairs cleared his throat. “Yes, I expect he would.”

“Will you follow me?”

They rode up in a private elevator. Carstairs felt triumphant. I don’t know how, he thought, or why. I don’t know who I have to thank for it. But I’m going to get out of this.

The pit boss waited at the door to Wallace’s office as Carstairs went in. Wallace sat behind a huge desk with his hands folded in his lap. He had a drooping mustache and a badly fitting hairpiece that failed to make him look younger. He wore a maroon leisure suit and a pearl-button shirt. The pearls looked real. When he said, “Sit down,” the wrinkles in his jowl doubled up on themselves.

Carstairs took a seat. Before he could open his mouth, Wallace said, “You won seventy thousand dollars tonight. They paid you by check. Let me have the check, please.”

“What’s this about? I won that money. I’ll pay you what I owe you, but rest is mine. I won it fair and square.” It was hard to keep his growing doubt out of his voice.

“Sit down, Carstairs.” This time it was an order. Carstairs sat. “Give me the check.”

Carstairs reached into the left breast pocket of his coat and took out a folded cashier’s check. “What’s to stop me,” he asked, fingers crimping the bright yellow paper of the check, “from simply walking out of here?”

Wallace tossed three Polaroid photographs onto the tabletop. They had been taken from somewhere behind Carstairs as he stood at the roulette table earlier. The first showed Carstairs in earnest conversation with the dark man in the tux. In the second the dark man was taking something behind Carstairs’ back, as if it had been handed to him. It was a large denomination bill. In the third photo, Carstairs leaned across the table to place a bet. The dark man had his hand in the air, signaling, and the croupier was nodding in return.

“This is a frame-up,” Carstairs said, more amazed than anything else.

“Very astute, Mr. Carstairs. I gather that Mr. Stahl has had his eyes on you for quite some time. I gather he has some interesting plans for you.”

“What ... plans?”

Wallace shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m just his second in command, not his conscience. I was only told that I was to watch out for you. If you were fool enough to gamble the last of your money, I was to help you lose. And then win enough to restore your hope.” Wallace leaned over and plucked the folded check from Carstairs’ hand and dropped it in his desk without looking at it. “You’re a born victim, Carstairs. This town thrives on people like you. When Mr. Stahl is ready for you, I’m sure he’ll let you know.”

Wallace stood up and signaled to the pit boss. “For the moment, Mr. Carstairs, you are our guest. Tony, show Mr. Carstairs to Room Seventeen. Then take these—” he stacked the Polaroids neatly with his thick fingers, “—back to Mr. Stahl.”

Carstairs followed Tony toward the door. “Remember,” Wallace said. “Don’t try anything foolish. It’s always open season on cheaters here.”

THE IRONY OF putting him in Room Seventeen was not lost on Carstairs. He sat on the dingy bedspread and looked at the lights of Reno. It had been early evening when he walked into the casino, and it was past midnight now.

He couldn’t forget the feeling of that seventy thousand dollars in his hands.

They’d wanted it that way, of course. They’d played him like a fish, and he’d let them do it.

There was a knock and the pit boss brought in a tray. It held a hamburger and fries and a bottle of bourbon. “Sorry,” Tony said. “The kitchen was closed and this was the best I could do.” He shrugged and left the room.

Carstairs sat down at the tray. He tore open a plastic packet of ketchup and squeezed it over the french fries. It glistened like fresh blood.

There was a covered dish at the side of the tray. Carstairs lifted the top and felt his blood go cold. It was a five-shot Smith and Wesson, .38 caliber. A note underneath it read, “Mr. Stahl will see you in his office, Room 435, when you’re ready to talk about your future.”

He understood then what he was supposed to do.

NO ONE FOLLOWED HIM down the hall. He rode the elevator to the fourth floor alone. The gun was stuck in the waistband of his trousers and seemed heavier than an anvil. He kept wiping his hands on his trousers and swallowing a sour taste that came up from his stomach.

The elevator opened and he stepped into a deserted hallway. He couldn’t seem to control his clumsy, shuffling feet. He walked up to 435, hesitated, then went in. There were voices, and five shots.

WHEN WALLACE CAME rushing into the room, Stahl’s body lay in a comer behind the desk, one arm pinned beneath him and the front of his shirt a huge crimson stain. Carstairs sat on the couch, his head hanging forward and the pistol dangling from one limp wrist. Wallace used his handkerchief to take the gun from him.

“Good work,” Wallace said. “I wondered if you’d take the hint. I admire your brains. Maybe I can find a way to help you get a really good lawyer.”

“You’re not letting me go? After what I did for you?”

“Sorry, Carstairs. I didn’t make you any promises. And I need you to take the fall on this one. I’m going to be gaining too much by Stahl’s death, you see. So I’m just going to have to call some cops.” He started for the phone, then hesitated. “You’re a victim, Carstairs. I warned you.”

Wallace was reaching for the phone when Stahl sat up.

“No police,” Stahl said. The hand that had been behind his body held a small automatic, pointed at Wallace’s stomach. “I can handle this one myself.”

Wallace backed away from the phone, his face numb with shock.

“I’m afraid you underestimated Carstairs, here,” Stahl said. “He figured out that none of the threats were coming from me directly. Only from you. And he didn’t think I would be stupid enough to invite an armed and desperate man into my office. So, a little ketchup from Carstairs’ dinner and a few holes in the couch...”

Carstairs finally spoke. “How could I trust you?” he asked Wallace. “You threatened my wife and kids. How could I hope to make a deal with somebody like that?”

“You can go now, Carstairs,” Stahl said. “With my thanks.”

“Then the debts are paid. Your word on it.”

“Yes. We’re even.”

On his way down in the elevator, Carstairs thought, we’re more than even. The check he’d handed over to Wallace was for twenty thousand. There was a second check, for forty-nine thousand, in the other pocket of his coat.

He passed the roulette table and walked out into the night without even stopping to look.